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**Contextualizing the comparative perceptions of Rome and China through  
written sources and archaeological data**

**DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

**ABSTRACT**

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## Objectives and goals

Relations between the Roman and the early Chinese Empires have been considerably popular fields of research, however, principally from a trade-oriented point of view. At the same time, an integrated approach of reception studies provides a more coherent nexus. In this regard, the thesis aims to contextualize the comparative perceptions of Rome and China (i.e. the Middle Empire) by using written sources and archaeological data as a complex system, in order to reveal new aspects of seeing and being seen.

Moreover, critical discourses on cross-cultural interactions and the interdisciplinary standpoint towards these dynamic interrelated systems are playing important role in recent studies. The integrated comparison of Chinese and Roman perceptions serves as a significant element of such debates. Accordingly, the period of 1<sup>st</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century constitutes the main body of the thesis, when *Daqin* 大秦 appears as a multifold synonym of the Roman Empire in Chinese records, and also when *Seres* are presented as vague ethnonym of silk makers on the easternmost part of the *Oikumene* in Antique works.

Through appropriate methods of investigation, it is possible to have a better understanding on the reception of foreign in China and Rome. Transparent glass vessels, western imported metalworks and decorated textiles in China; silk tapestries and *hu* bronzes in the *Imperium Romanum* carry a multiple *testimonia* of cultural impacts and interactions, leading towards a stereotyped and utopian picture of the two *imperii*. The dissertation intends to focus on the complexity of such cross-imperial connections through contextualizing the most significant Chinese- and Roman-interpreted archaeological finds. The incorporation of archaeological remains into the complex, utopian and multileveled *Daqin/Seres*-tradition helps to understand local answers to the Non-Local.

Principally, by a detailed and critical examination of Roman-related transparent glass vessels, it also aims to enlighten problems on earlier identifications and interpretations. In addition, a precise recollection of the existing data not only allows to catalogue the above mentioned objects, but also helps to insert these glass artifacts into Roman glass typology system.

Therefore, the thesis attempts to provide a reliable and searchable database in order to differentiate Roman-originated from Roman-associated items.

Consequently, the dissertation is devoted to collect, analyze, contextualize and compare significant materials connected to the perceptions of Rome and China.

Furthermore, it seeks to highlight questions such as:

1. What factors might play role in forming perceptions of Rome and China and how?
2. How ways of seeing and being seen could be described in context of China and Rome?
3. Is there any universality/common aspect in Roman and Chinese perceptions of each other?
4. How reception of foreign could be depicted in context of the two *imperii*?
5. In light of complex approaches and methods, how Sino-Roman relations could be (re)described?

Moreover, by giving an available anthology of publications, sites and finds in China, the thesis also intends to draw attention on the importance of Chinese archaeology. As a synopsis of some historical, geographical and socio-cultural phenomena in the 1<sup>st</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century East-Asia, it might also help to deepen Hungarian academic knowledge on this field

## **Materials and Methods**

Chronological frame of the dissertation spans from the 1<sup>st</sup> century to the 5<sup>th</sup> century (although earlier and later sources were also analyzed) from the appearance of term *Daqin* and *Seres* until the elementary changes of data in the 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century. Altogether forty-five Chinese and ninety-one Latin/Greek works were collected and studied in order to outline the comparative perceptions of Rome and China. In light of difficulties of appropriate interpretations, summaries were given by using originals and various translations as control works.

Chinese sources on *Daqin* were grouped by relevance (primary and secondary), type (e. g. historiographies or geographical treaties etc.) and date (before or after the 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century). Each category was followed by a conclusion of perceptions defined by their description.

In the same way, sources on *Seres/Thinae* etc. were arranged into groups according to date and genre, each followed by chapters of conclusions.

Besides written works, archaeological finds were examined as an equivalent but independent category in order to build a complex system of information. The relating chapters contain sixty-nine, the catalogue sixty-four items interpreted as Roman/Chinese in earlier studies. These objects were analyzed in their complexity: social context, geographical and historical nexus. Regarding the problems and limits of such comprehensive research – especially concerning archaeological remains discovered in the People's Republic of China – only published materials were used.

Although Roman-like transparent glass vessels unearthed in China are the most remarkable (both in number and relevance) group of archaeological finds – since original materials are hardly available – still many misinterpretations and misquotations are existing in modern studies. In light of these problems the catalogue of these items devoted to collect all the existing data to build a reliable, searchable and verifiable database, which might serve as a basis for later research. At the same time, in case of Roman-related textiles, Chinese silks and bronze vessels – due to their different characteristics (i.e. well documentation) and role in perceptions – situation is dissimilar: relating chapters and catalogues only intend to focus on main patterns and mechanisms.

## **Structure**

The body of dissertation is divided into six main parts and – regarding the complexity of the subject – into several subchapters.

Head divisions are the following:

### **I.**

#### ***Daqin* in ancient Chinese written works**

Through a careful examination of the accounts of *Daqin* it is possible to visualize how the Chinese imagined another ancient empire far in the West. The Chinese historical records, annals, geographical treaties, Taoist scriptures, Buddhist sutras etc. provide more or less information on the interpretation of the name of that mysterious country. Furthermore, they add details about its geography, administration, trade and the envoys sent by *Daqin* people and economy, including agriculture, domesticated animals and products. Among the curious products that came from *Daqin*, jades, gemstones, glass and glass-like materials occur in a significant number of them.

Although the presented historical annals, encyclopedias, etc. only had second-hand data influenced by the great distance and their particular interpretation of the world, it is more significant that they had the claim to make a reasonably complex description about *Daqin*. In these passages the Roman Empire is a distant, utopian country surrounded by mythical places. The locals are civilized and virtuous, making rare, mysterious products.

A short reflection on the history of Sino-Roman relations is followed by the explanation of the multileveled *Daqin*-concept and the detailed study of perceptions in different source-categories.

As a result, these perceptions – regarding aspects of time – can be described as a complex, multifolded system, where *Daqin* is:

1. distant, almost unreachable, remote country – on the westernmost part of the known world
2. mystical, homeland of magic and supernatural phenomena
3. utopian, locals are honest and wise, there is no crime and the ruler is righteous
4. homeland of extraordinary and exotic products – symbol of provenance of hardly obtainable rarities

Furthermore, in some works new aspects – e. g. on the Nestorian Stele – are added, such as:

5. beyond the sphere of profane a liturgical feature is given

## II.

### **Roman-related archaeological data discovered in the People's Republic of China**

Second of the main divisions is focusing on the Roman and Roman-like materials unearthed in China.

Among the archaeological finds, transparent glass vessels are considered to be the most remarkable group. Besides the significant number of glass discoveries, in some cases chemical analyses are also available, which might help to identify the origin of these objects. However, in several cases, the contexts of these items are poorly documented or corrupted in some ways. Regarding the above mentioned difficulties and importance of the material group, the catalogue collects all the existing data including illustrations, relevant publications, measurements, detailed descriptions etc. in order to enlighten their social background.

At the same time, it is also significant that western-imported glass objects were discovered in a remarkable number in the eastern coastal part of the People's Republic of China. They were unearthed in burials of the most prestigious and well-defined stratum of Chinese aristocracy and were also highly treasured because of their transparency, rarity and mysterious characteristics. According to the literary sources these mythical objects most often originated in the utopian *Daqin*, the land of curiosity and exotic.

Furthermore, considering the role of Roman-related objects in Chinese society, despite their concrete price and rarity, they might have been described from ritual and symbolic aspects as well, which resulted in value beyond material sphere.

At the same time, Roman and Roman-influenced finds discovered in Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region regarding the cultural–ethnic diversity of the area are divided into a separate group. As a consequence of the above mentioned particularities, Roman-related artifacts from this region might not have had direct impact on formulating perceptions of *Daqin* in Chinese society. Moreover, presumably none of these items associated with such complex/varied traditions might be directly connected to the Roman Empire (except transparent glass vessels that underwent chemical composition analyses). However, typical characteristics of Hellenistic/Roman art can be clearly detected. In this manner, these Roman-related objects play an indirect role in affecting perceptions of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, these items might also help to have a deeper understanding on the various and complex artistic/cultural models of the Silk Road.

Concerning Roman-like metalwares, a similar pattern – taking problems of their insignificant number into consideration (only two items for the whole research period) – can be outlined.

Summing up the significant information obtained from Roman-related archaeological data, the following perceptions of the Roman Empire can be outlined:

1. distant: its products are moved by series of middlemen as a long-term (in some cases hundreds of years ) action, which results in an increasing material value
2. mystical: manufacturer of goods, often connected to ritual practice in Chinese society, which result in an increasing immaterial value of its products

It is – compared to descriptions in Buddhist sutras – complemented with a special aspect outlined by textiles from the desert region of Xinjiang, metalworks, figurative and visual artworks:

3. a nearly indefinable area with specific (Hellenistic) cultural characteristics/civilization(?) designating the region of *Bactria* in particular

The above mentioned perceptions are adding new aspects towards the multileveled, utopian and mystical image of the Roman Empire.

### **III.**

#### **The Roman Empire in China – Comprehensive review**

In light of the several problems by using Chinese materials (availability, documentation, interdisciplinarity etc.) a detailed review of *Daqin*/Rome- image is given as a third part of the dissertation's main body.

#### IV.

##### **The Far-East in Antique texts – perceptions of China in the Roman Empire**

The special image of the easternmost *Oikumene* in Greek/Roman written sources constitutes the fourth major section of the thesis.

Considering the specific features of perceptions of China in the Roman Empire different methods of approach are necessary to be used. Despite the considerable larger amount of actual texts (ninety-one presented in relating chapters) and archaeological finds (thirteen items yet alone in province *Pannonia*), a concrete China conception (in conventional terms) did not exist at this period (i.e. 1–5<sup>th</sup> century).

The term *Seres* used by Greek/Roman authors implies a vague ethnonym of silk makers on the easternmost part of the *Oikumene*. Although since the 1<sup>st</sup> century other expressions e. g. *Thinae/Sinai* are existing as more direct allusions of China, these idioms cannot be considered as elements of Antique doxography. Despite such problems, a careful research of these texts might help to deepen knowledge of Roman perceptions (affected by propaganda, philosophy etc.) on the Far-East, and in this manner on China as well.

According to these rather ambiguous ideas, Roman views are similar in many ways to the *Daqin* perceptions, where *Serica/Thinae/Sinai* – and indirectly the Middle Empire – is

1. distant, almost unreachable, remote country – on the easternmost part of the known world
2. mystical (particularly in the 1<sup>st</sup> century)
3. utopian, locals are honest and wise, there is no crime
4. homeland of extraordinary and exotic products – one but not only symbol of provenance of hardly obtainable rarities

#### V.

##### **Chinese objects in the Roman Empire**

The fifth major section of the dissertation deals with some significant Chinese-interpreted archaeological remains discovered in the Roman Empire.

As a consequence of unconventional perceptions on the Middle Empire, Chinese archaeological finds have been analyzed principally to describe particular models and patterns.

Therefore, relating chapters are focusing on Chinese silks as important features of *Seres/Thinae* accounts.

First, a detailed study of Greek/Latin texts on *Seric* textiles is given followed by an analysis of Palmyran silks with Chinese characters and Chinese silk finds from *Pannonia*.

Despite the fact that knowledge on provenance of these precious materials was rather vague (they were originated from the undefined East; *Serica* or *Thinae*) and therefore had no direct role in China-perceptions, yet they might reflect on special aspects of trends and highlight the importance of luxurious textiles in imperial propaganda.

As a consequence, Chinese silk – without having any relevant idea on the Middle Empire in Roman society – can be regarded as a significant agent from cultural, economic and social angles as well. Detailed examination of the above mentioned aspects concerning peculiarities of Rome's Eastern policy is also presented in the relating chapters.

At the same time, Chinese bronze vessels discovered in the *Imperium Romanum* are also discussed. However, considering the insignificant number of these finds and their dubious background, presumably none of them had relevant impact on perceptions of China. Therefore, no more than a short survey is given.

## **VI.**

### **Comparative perceptions of Rome and China – Theory and conclusion**

The sixth section serves as a collection of main results presented in the dissertation, where an outline of theoretical framework and some alternative approaches are given.

## **Results**

The sixth section of the dissertation's body contains the comparison of similar and dissimilar perceptions which can be regarded as a synthesis of major results.

Through a careful comparison – taking cultural, philosophical etc. heterogeneity into account – it is possible to outline universalities/common aspects in Roman and Chinese visions. These common features are considered to be examples of typical utopian *topoi*, where the people of *Daqin* and the *Seres* are:

- 1 residents of the westernmost/easternmost part of the known world, in a remote and unapproachable area;
2. with mystical/magical (longevity) utopian (peaceful, straightforward) characteristics;
3. distant, famous for their commercial activity and high-quality articles (multicoloured glass or fine silk tapestries);



4. symbols of exotics,
5. thereby vehicles of imperial propaganda and
6. moral rhetoric.

Moreover, the comparative reception of the two *Imperii* is also presented as an interdisciplinary approach towards the problem of seeing and being seen. The various responses on foreign in Chinese and Roman society are also depicted by using the archaeological data. Through focusing on transparent glass vessels and silk remains relating paragraphs are concentrating on possible forms of selection, evaluation, appropriation etc. The temporal and spatial patterns of perceptions – as significant elements of a complex mechanism – are also studied and form another important viewpoint of the dissertation.

In addition, a further result of the thesis is the particular intention of a holistic and critical approach towards written sources and archaeological data in order to incorporate them into an integrated system. Particularly, concerning western imported glass vessels discovered in China – as one of the most informative but corrupted material group –, a searchable database has been built to serve as a reliable and available basis of future research.

Consequently, through complex approaches and methods, the dissertation (re)describes Sino-Roman relations in several aspects.

Last but not least, as an effort of the thesis, another synthesis of some major features of East-Asian history and archaeology has been available for Hungarian scholarship.

## **Limits and Future Tasks of Research**

Despite the intentions of the thesis, towards a deeper understanding on factors of cross-cultural interactions and perceptions, further multidisciplinary approaches would be essential. Such as critical debates on mediator cultures, peripheries and temporal cultural situations, or on eligibility of world-system theories – taking limits and boundaries into account.

Hybridization – especially in context of Xinjiang – and application of complex network analysis – as used in context of Byzantine and Tang Empires – might also play an important role in future studies.

However, considering the limits of research (problems on accessibility, documentation, determination of provenance etc), a demanding and multileveled discourse through an interdisciplinary research project is required.

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